

Recruitment and Retention of Assessment Personnel

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Abstract

With a national shortage of special education personnel, including assessment personnel (Caranikas-Walker; Shapley, Cordeau, 2006; Karr, 2005), rural communities face serious challenges in retaining and recruiting highly qualified special education staff due to limited access to university training programs (Hausman & Hausman, 2003; Knapczyk, Chapman, Rodes, & Chung, 2001). This article presents research-based methods that rural school districts can use to recruit and retain assessment personnel. Many of the steps that are helpful for recruiting and retaining assessment personnel are either not utilized or underutilized (Caranikas-Walker et al.; Simpson & Lynch, 2005). Factors for assessment personnel that influenced their decision to accept a position and to stay in their positions are discussed.

Recruitment and Retention of Assessment Personnel

Federal mandates, such as IDEA 2004 and No Child Left Behind, have led to dramatic changes in the breadth and scope of the educational system serving children with disabilities. Educators have found themselves faced with higher accountability measures and the need to implement research-based teaching methods. Such transformations have broadened the role of diagnostic personnel. The evolution of the role of assessment personnel now extends beyond the sheer act of testing and incorporates a role that includes consultation, establishing eligibility, administrative responsibilities, including an endless array of paperwork, and conducting numerous IEP meetings (Texas Center for Educational Research, 2001). The already large caseloads of assessment personnel present additional challenges as their jobs expand. The increases in the responsibilities in the profession have also led to an increase in the number of qualified and experienced diagnosticians leaving the field due to early retirement or simply a desire to change professions (Caranikas-Walker, Shapley, & Cordeau, 2006). Increasing the supply of qualified assessment personnel allows for effective evaluations and services to those children on their caseloads. While the number of children being referred for special education services is increasing, the supply of assessment personnel is declining. Such

decline has contributed to diagnostic staff being ranked as the fourth highest area of need (Hausman & Hausman, 1999).

Critical Role of Assessment Personnel

Special education administrators in rural areas are faced with the continuing challenge of filling vacancies with highly qualified staff in a time when there is a critical shortage of certified special educators and assessment personnel (Caranikas-Walker et al., 2006; Karr, 2005). The current shortage of special education personnel has been documented for a number of years, with 80% of the nation's largest schools reporting a need for additional special education personnel in 1998 (Recruiting New Teachers, 1998). In 1995, the U.S. Department of Education estimated that by the next decade an additional 267,000 special education personnel would be needed to serve the national special education population. Silvestra (as cited in Whitworth, 2000) estimated that the demand for special education professionals would increase the total number of professionals from 338,000 in 1994 to at least 545,000 by 2005. He further stated that the number of special education personnel needed could rise to as high as 648,000 by 2005. McLeskey, Tyler, & Flippin (2004) contended that with the current problem of retaining and recruiting special education personnel, the educational system must focus on ideas to attract people into the field. The researcher added that schools are having a difficult time finding personnel because there are only a limited number of new graduates in the field of special education each year. These factors present a particular challenge for rural communities where educators face difficulties becoming fully certified due to their inaccessibility to university training (Hausman & Hausman, 2003; Knapczyk, Chapman, Rodes, & Chung, 2001; Rosenkoetter, Irwin, & Saceda, 2004).

Hausman and Hausman (1999) studied the needs for special education personnel in rural communities and contended that the ongoing shortage for qualified personnel in the special education field should be declared a national emergency. In their report, diagnostic staff ranked as the fourth highest area of need. As the demand for accountability for student learning has increased in recent years, there have been increasing numbers of referrals for special education services, resulting in a growing need for educational assessment personnel (National Clearinghouse for Professions in Special Education, 2000).

The roles and responsibilities of assessment personnel differ from state to state, and even the professional title given to such personnel varies among states, based on certification and licensure standards. Some titles associated with the assessment role include educational diagnostician, psychometrician, psychometrist, or educational evaluator (Sutton, Elksnin, Layton & McElroy, 2003). The National Clearinghouse for Professions in Special Education (2005) reported that the heavy demands placed on general and special education personnel will further expand the role of diagnostic personnel. Some believe that the job outlook for diagnostic personnel is quite promising because the need for evaluations will continue to increase, as well as the importance placed on the role of assessment personnel (National Clearinghouse for Professions in Special Education).

In order to address the shortage and increasing need for diagnostic personnel, Hausman and Hausman (1999) recommended that studies investigate the factors influencing the recruitment and retention of assessment personnel. The analysis of both retention and recruitment of assessment personnel has important implications for the future of special education programs and the individuals served in these programs. Only if these factors are identified and implemented will the field of education continue to progress to meet the needs of individuals with significant educational needs.

Investigating Factors Promoting Recruitment and Retention

Although the research examining the supply and demand for special education teachers continues to grow (see McLeskey et al., 2004; Billingsley, B.S., 2004 for reviews), research investigating assessment personnel is limited. Two studies were identified that examined the recruitment and retention of assessment personnel in rural areas (Caranikas-Walker et al., 2006; Texas Center for Educational Research, 2001), however, data on the assessment personnel could not be disaggregated.

In a 2005 study, Simpson and Lynch examined special education directors' perceptions of the effectiveness of recruitment and retention methods for assessment personnel. In addition, the study investigated whether school districts were implementing those strategies that special education directors perceived as most important. Since assessment personnel are certified under the title of "educational diagnostician" in the state where the research was conducted, this descriptor was used in the study. This study used a questionnaire as the primary instrument for data collection in the survey. Item content for the survey was developed through a review of current literature and current legislation. A panel of experts consisting of special education directors, university professors, and certified educational diagnosticians established content validity by reviewing the instrument. In addition, a field test involving a panel of knowledgeable professionals in the area of special education and assessment was conducted primarily for wording and coherence as well as to review and critique the rating scales.

Surveys were mailed to all special education directors in Texas public schools (n=475). The survey consisted of three sections. The first section addressed demographic information including years of experience as a special education director and whether or not the respondents had worked in the position of an educational diagnostician. It also requested information pertaining to the number of educational diagnosticians employed in the district, educational diagnostician's caseload, and the current number of educational diagnostician vacancies.

The second section contained closed-ended questions consisting of a five-part Likert-type response pertaining to recruitment and retention methods. This section required the participants to note whether or not the specified recruitment or retention strategies were currently used by their districts, and to rate the perceived importance of each factor on a scale from 1 (not important) to 5 (very important). The last section of the survey provided the opportunity for the respondents to make suggestions for specific recruitment and efforts that have proved successful in their district.

A total of 475 surveys were mailed through the United States Post Office. Of these, 360 questionnaires were returned for a response rate of 76%. All data were recorded, proofed for errors, and analyzed. The data were analyzed using descriptive statistics to determine which methods of recruitment and retention for educational diagnosticians were being used in Texas public school districts. The data also indicated which factors were perceived as having greater influence on the recruitment and retention process.

Recruitment Factors

Results of the investigation indicated that special education directors perceived salaries, administrative support, caseload, and benefits as having the most potential in influencing educational diagnosticians to accept positions within their districts. Each of these factors fell within the range of means from 4.1 to 4.3. Special education directors perceived salary as being most influential with a mean of 4.3. A large percentage (82.22%) of special education directors strongly agreed/agreed that salary served as a recruitment factor for educational diagnosticians. A similar percentage (82.20%) of the respondents strongly agreed/agreed that administrative support served as a recruitment factor while approximately 80% (80.28%) of the respondents strongly agreed/agreed that caseload served as a recruitment factor for educational diagnosticians. Slightly over three-fourths (76.39%) of special education directors strongly agreed/agreed that benefits served as a recruitment factor for educational diagnosticians. The factors that were found to be effective for recruiting assessment personnel and their ratings are found in Table 1.

Table 1 —Importance Ratings of Recruitment Factors

Recruitment Factors	Frequency	Percent	Mean Rating
Salary	290	80.56	4.3
Administrative Support	278	77.22	4.3
Benefits	274	76.11	4.2
Computer Generated report writing/scoring	261	72.50	4.1
Caseload	235	65.28	4.0
Clerical Assistance Staff	234	65.00	4.0
District Size	233	64.72	3.9
Job Responsibilities	205	56.94	3.9
Location of School/District	204	56.67	3.9
Induction/Support/Mentoring Programs	191	53.16	3.9
Stipends	142	39.44	3.8
Contributions to School and Society	127	35.30	3.8
Needed a Job	118	32.78	3.5
Hiring/Signing Bonus	37	10.28	3.4

Retention Factors

Results of the survey indicated that special education directors perceived job satisfaction, administrative support, salary, professional development, job security, being part of the decision making process, benefits, and caseload as having the most potential in influencing educational diagnosticians to remain in their current position as an educational diagnostician. The means of each of these factors fell between 4.1 and 4.4. The overall mean for retention factors was 4.0. Special education directors perceived job satisfaction and administrative support as being most influential with a mean of 4.4. Based on the data collected, 77.23% of special education directors strongly agreed/agreed that job satisfaction served as a retention factor for educational diagnosticians while slightly over 87% (87.77%) of the respondents strongly agreed/agreed that administrative support served as a retention factor for educational diagnosticians. The next most influential factor was salary, with a mean of 4.3. According to the respondents, 81.11 % strongly agreed/agreed that salary served as a retention factor for educational diagnosticians. Special education directors also responded that being part of the decision-making team, professional development, job security, and caseload were important factors in retaining educational diagnosticians. These factors carried means of 4.2. The factors influencing perceived effectiveness in retention or recruitment of assessment personnel are reported in Table 2.

Table 2. Importance Ratings of Retention Factors

Retention Factors	Frequency	Mean Rating
Job Satisfaction	238	4.4
Administrative Support	269	4.4
Salary	255	4.3
Part of the Decision making Process	258	4.2
Professional development	259	4.2
Job Security	245	4.2
Caseload	231	4.2
Benefits	254	4.1
Stipends	126	3.9
Induction/Support/Mentoring	177	3.9
Location of School/District	195	3.9
Clerical Assistance Staff	211	3.9
Technology Usage in IEP Meeting	222	3.8
Career Advancement Opportunities	108	3.6
Contributions to School and Society	158	3.6
Retention Bonus	32	3.5

Respondents also identified additional recruiting and retention strategies that were not addressed in the survey instrument. Rather, these strategies were offered in the open-ended questions on the survey. These factors included holding job fairs, extending recruitment areas, posting vacancies on the Internet, providing internships, using current staff to recruit, advertising with universities, offering flexible work times, “grow your own” programs, and contracting with retired diagnostic personnel. Other strategies involved collaborating with regional service centers, networking through professional organizations, and using staff in other departments to recruit assessment personnel. Based on the strategies reported, school districts were using a variety of creative and unique methods to improve the recruitment and retention of assessment personnel. Further data are reported on Tables 1 and 2.

Summary and Conclusions

Based on the findings from the reported study, five strategies were identified that were considered important for both recruitment and retention efforts. These strategies included providing administrative support, an adequate salary, sufficient benefits, manageable caseloads, and effective mentoring. It may be that this information can assist rural administrators and school boards in developing a better understanding of recruitment and retention strategies that can be utilized in order to fill vacancies with highly qualified assessment personnel. Subsequently, administrators can develop strategies and solutions that can be incorporated into strategic planning. Administrators in rural areas would be remiss not to take advantage of the opportunity to improve recruitment and retention strategies, especially when improvements contribute directly to providing highly qualified staff to support the achievement of students with disabilities in an age of accountability.

It is also evident that a major limitation to this research was the reporting of data based on one study in a single state. However, Texas is a large and diverse state with a high number of school-age children. Texas has 1,031 schools districts, two-thirds of which are located in rural areas or small towns; about half have enrollments under 700 (Rural School and Community Trust, 2006). Thus, the results of this study have direct application to many educators in rural school districts. Administrators in other states with similar shortages in special education personnel may well benefit from using the strategies that were identified as being effective in recruiting and retaining staff in an era of shortages. Clearly, additional research is needed at many levels – local, state, and national, in order to fill the ever-growing demands of assessment personnel in this age of accountability.

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